Everyone in the cell receives me with affection when I return among them. They had pitied me for my naivety with Arthur Koestler’s book, and now they had a bit more confidence in me. I surprise myself by asking the doctor what happened to the swallow. “It gave up making a nest here,” he tells me. Too bad — it would have been a proof that it was not bad here either, I tell myself.

The doctor tells me that, having run out of speakers, he had to give a talk. He talked about the demographic explosion, and he succeeded to unite everyone against him.

“How so?” I ask.

“I spoke openly, without humanitarian prejudices. I showed that, most likely, two demographic explosions will take place, not only one, and that, if the first will be bearable for humanity, the second one will be unbearable on all counts.”

“Which one is the second?” I ask.

“I will tell you in a moment. We all heard something of the first demographic explosion and, even here, every newcomer who is more informed tells us about the worries that the Westerners have. Even under the hypothesis of limiting births from now on, the increase in population will become problematic by the end of century. This is what I thought: if this sudden increase in population risks being an evil for humanity, let us remember its cause. Everybody knows it: the decrease of infant mortality. What is more logical, then, than to suspend medical care for newborns for two, three, or five years? And natural selection would kick in.”

“But it is criminal,” I say.

“This is what our colleagues said too.”
“Let me remind you what a contemporary scientist said, showing that all progress of humanity was done against natural selection.”

“I returned to this problem,” the doctor resumes, “and I acknowledged that, after all, it is about billions of young people who will know, with their energy, to find solutions. But what do we do with the second demographic explosion, that of the old people?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, until now, the population increased rather from the outside, by the appearance of new beings. Now it will grow from the inside as well, since the old beings no longer disappear. It is almost certain that man’s life will be prolonged until 120–140 years old. But doubling the age means doubling the population. Unfortunately, life will be prolonged — for the moment, at least — as old age. I was telling our colleagues that this looks like the story from the antiquity with one of Priam’s brothers, who had obtained from a goddess eternal life, but forgot to also ask for youth, and so he remained an old man into eternity. Let us ask ourselves: three billion young people can be supported by humanity, but can humanity support three other billions, especially billions of old people?

“You see, medicine, with its entire cortege of auxiliary or neighboring sciences, has triumphed. In a way, it has obtained its revenge against the ironies it suffered so many times (just as meteorology today) at the hands of a Molière, for example, or of those who could not forget that the ancestor of the surgeon was the barber. Now, medicine has triumphed; but hasn’t it triumphed too well, tending to prolong life beyond its natural limits? Something must be done, then. After all, by a consensus in the interest of humanity, medicine might not apply its means to extend life. Not all progresses are immediately uncovered: it seems, for example, that there are one-person aircrafts, but the army keeps them secret; or artificial rain, and so many other things. But the physicians, just like the physicists, do not keep any secret. If they can extend life, they will do it. Something must be done, then, to prevent them from doing so.
“Someone asked me, ‘Do you want to put old people up in the tree and then shake it?’

“This irritated me a little,” the doctor continued, “so I said: ‘No, we only have to make them get up in the tree by themselves. After all, the problem will become relevant only after 20 or 30 years, when we will also be old. What I say is this: we must understand that we will be overpopulated and that we will pollute our spiritual, political, and cultural life, our public taste, and our history. Until we also find the solution to prolong active life, old people, in their wisdom, will have to take some measures themselves. For a period of time, it would be good to find some noble justifications or who knows what ethical and religious significations for the right to suicide after a certain age. But this problem can be raised in a different way as well: for centuries, youth has been urged to be ready to give its life for one thing or other, for the “country” most of the times but also for much more debatable ideals or purposes. Wars have been waged with hecatombs of young people. Can’t we ask for some “heroism” from the old people as well? In the meantime, as I heard that some Japanese do, they can do competitive sport, but en masse and mandatorily. This could speed up their infarcts.’

“All people in the room stopped me at this point,” the doctor admits. “The theologian over there, who now speaks with that guy, who seems a bit agitated, told me, ‘We don’t need to become beasts if we stay in prison.’ He was right, in a way, I grant it. But you tell me: don’t we have to call things as they are?”

I look at him and try to see beyond this surface of cruelty.

“Do you know what I would do to you when they release you and would have to give you a job?” I would send you to a geriatric clinic. I am sure you would be fully devoted to all people.”

“Perhaps, out of my scientific interest in the problem of old age,” the doctor answers smiling.

* Under Communism, all people had to have a job. Officially, there was no unemployment. After graduating college, for example, students were assigned to different positions depending on grades, their party connections, and their propagandistic activities while in college.
“What is that, ‘geriatric’?” asked the young guy from the country, Matei, who had listened to my speech on exactness and who had listened to our discussion.

He seemed to desire to learn as much as possible. I translate the word so that he could understand it. I even start talking to him, being glad to be able to relax a bit after the conversation with the doctor. Matei has not been embittered by prison. On the contrary, he tells me that, being imprisoned for the second time, he came back here with some joy: he was coming to the “University”! He had not found out about so many books, movies, sciences, and languages at any other place. Now, he was learning 4–5 languages at the same time, badly, of course, but he was learning them.

“Why don’t you learn just one or two, but well?”

“I could not, because I am not schooled well enough. But I want to be able to communicate with anyone, just like those sailors who used to travel much. I like people and their variety. Maybe I’ll get to travel the world. But you can travel even if you stay put, as a merchant, for example. I fully experienced the joy of commerce, and this is why I got here twice. I cannot work in the factory or in the office; I’d do anything to work in freedom. I left home to the city when I was 14; at the outskirts of the city, on a field, a group of young guys were forming two soccer teams that were playing for money. I joined one of them, I lost half of the money I had on me, and I ended up at one of my teammates’ father, who had a shoemaking workshop.

“At the beginning, when I saw that a simple shoe is made of 24 pieces with 24 different names, I got scared. Then it became monotonous. I could no longer stand the sedentary life at the shop. I tried something more special: to go on my own, with a minimum of tools and fabrics, in search for clients, as the buyers of old clothes do. I purposely followed one of these people for a full day. I think he yelled ‘buying old clooooothes’ a thousand times, but nobody called him to sell him anything. I suspect he was walking too fast, or he was just beating the air, having who knows what other purposes in mind. I began differently: I was walking slowly, starting conversations with some child or some
woman standing by the gate, asking them if they have any shoes to repair, and so I was beginning to have some results. You must invent your clients, create a need for them: this is the art of trade. At times, I was invited to lunch. In any case, I was talking to all sorts of people while I was repairing their shoes. All went well until I fell upon a shoemaker’s family and I asked if they have something to repair. I ended up at the police and then condemned for illegal practice and vagrancy. When I came out after a short detention, I was sent to the factory.

“In the factory,” Matei continues his story, “I think I understood why today’s world, everywhere, is not good. I would not have stayed there for a long time if my work in the factory had not given me the right to take some evening courses and thus learn something. But, after all, I did not regret the factory. I first learned one thing: in a factory, in any factory, you cannot work with joy. This is something serious, I thought, for today’s world; it is like a heavy curse on a factory. Joy is, I don’t know, a bit crooked, and in a factory everything is in straight lines. It’s not just the shoe factories, where nobody works any longer on a full shoe, but only for one of the 24 parts; but, as I said, it’s bad in any factory. Man starts the machine, and then the machine moves man. Well, if the machine is so great, I thought, why wouldn’t it do the job by itself?”

“This is what happens today,” I interrupt him. “We have arrived at automatized industries.”

“I heard this, too. I even think that this is when the benefit as well as the wickedness of the machine will be revealed. First, it makes you work without joy (my shoemaker master was at times whistling when he hammered a nail; here, nobody sings); then, the machine breathes differently than man, who may take a rest, sigh, or have a chat. But there is something else, some kind of pollution, as they say today, but not only of the atmosphere or the surrounding world (it’s their business how they take care of it), but a pollution of the souls. I have never seen more envy than in factories, among workers. They do this much, make that much money; everything is measured. Why would others make money freely, they say. They began with the merchants, they
continued with the physicians, and ended with the waiters and the barbers. Why should they receive a tip? They, the workers in factories, remained persecuted by fate, and this is how they will remain as long as there are factories in the world.”

“Don’t worry,” the doctor steps in, “the numbers of workers in factories will diminish more and more, just as the number of plowmen in the country. Someone who was passing through our room said that, in the United States, more than 50% of the workforce does not produce goods, but rather ‘provides services,’ so in schools, hospitals, banks, and stores. But I want to tell you that people are not pleased there either.”

“Perhaps the spirit of the factory entered them,” Matei replies.

I wonder: how could the communists throw into prison people so pure of heart? Why didn’t they try to transform them into followers? Matei tells me that the prosecutor called him a class traitor at the trial. “What will you do when you get out?” I ask him. “I will continue to be a traitor, if they don’t leave me alone. Nobody gives them any trouble anymore. Why do they fight everyone else?”

I get up to move a little. While I walk between the bunk beds, I hear fragments of conversation between the theologian and the guy next to him, who had seemed a little agitated. After a few years of staying in the cell by myself or just with one other person, now, that I rediscover a group of people, I cannot avoid feeling attracted by the variety of human specimens: Ernest, the doctor, Matei, of course Alec… I walk a few times through the corridor of beds, but the theologian senses that something makes me slow down every time I pass by them, and I listen.

“Look,” he tells me at one of these stops, “come here to meet a totally special man, engineer Goldstein. He discusses theology with me because he wants to become a Christian. Perhaps you

* After the Communists came to power, many people were fighting against them by forming armed groups in the mountains. By the time Noica is imprisoned, almost all of these resistance groups were annihilated. It’s possible that Matei refers to this kind of resistance when he says that nobody troubles them anymore.
can help me to understand him, because I don’t really understand what he wants with this.”

The engineer offers me his hand; for a moment, he does not look into my eyes, as if ashamed, and then his warm look embraces me.

“How could he understand what I want,” he says, “if I don’t know well what I should say? I would become a Christian out of my love for the Jewish people.”

The theologian looks at me as if saying, you figure out what this means. I sit down next to them and I listen…

How strange these meetings in prison are: you don’t sit next to a man, but next to an entire life. But there is something upside-down in time and upside-down with regard to life itself, as in the vision of the Prophet from the Old Testament, where houses begin to take on life. At the beginning, here, in a room as this one, a skeleton sits next to a skeleton. The first skeleton says something: it thus gives itself a voice. The second skeleton turns its skull toward it: it gives itself sight. The first one invents a hand, the second one, another hand. One skeleton brings in the world a mother, the other a brother. At times, the two skeletons begin to quarrel, they get fists, muscles, and they invent the fight. Life seems to be rebuilt here, piece by piece. You shake one skeleton a bit, and you see coming out of it, like from a mechanical box, love, a job, two children, a gun forgotten in the attic, capital punishment transformed into hard work for life. You shake another one, and, like under a magic eye, there are other things coming out of it, great cities of the world, images from a dream, then the beginning of a counterrevolution, a fateful hunting dog, and a defiance before the communists. Flesh and life slowly get attached to these skeletons, as in a game of cubes,* bringing buttons, mouths, steps, or attitudes. At times, there are not enough cubes, and the skeleton remains with uncovered parts: without a nose, without a way of walking, without tics, or

* Noica refers to a game with several cubes which had sides of different colors. Children used them to construct various figures, by placing them on top of each other.
without a life goal; other times, there are too many pieces, and so, after you finished remaking one real life, you must attached to it one, two, or three possible lives, with their deliriums and the fullness of their “non-living.” A shadow, like the skeletons here, takes in its hand the entire history of the world and throws it as in a game.

Engineer Goldstein cannot come out of the fascination with the condition of being a Jew, and he feels responsible for the destiny of his people. It is the only people that has transformed its most catastrophic defeats in victories, but also the only one — he says — which transforms a victory into a defeat. For him, it is unbelievable how a people that gave the Universal to the world can withdraw so much in its particular. It gave all goods to the world, and it kept for itself what is most bitter. The engineer doesn’t “understand” his own people, and this fascinates him. All nations have a stable space, a history, their own creations, joy, and fatigue. His nation has nothing of these. It gave to all, but it only has a book as great creation, the Old Testament, which has been confiscated by other people, to make marvelous works of art, history, and wisdom out of it, as his people did not know to do. It built a Temple, and it was immediately destroyed. It had no full joy, but it does not labor to want anything, to hope, or to fight — for what?

“It gave,” engineer Goldstein continues, “the two great religions of this decisive half of 2,000 years of the world; it gave Christianity and, indirectly but by itself, Islam. Let us leave aside Islam, which seems to have adopted everything that was fanatical in Judaism. But what a splendid gift has it given to the world with Christianity, in which it did not want to see itself in the beginning, when it could place its seal on it — instead of the Greek Jews, like Paul, or the Greeks themselves later — nor later, when Christianity was accepted by Rome and the Jewish people could have priority, as chosen people, by accepting it. It did not want to be the first people of the world; this is unbelievable. Did it want to be the only one? The only saved one?

“Then something else appeared. After it gave the religious Universal to our humanity, it has prepared the secular Universal
for 2,000 years. What is this Universal? Being in diaspora, but home everywhere; engaging in trade, and not in agriculture; using money, and not goods; making calculations, and not value judgments; being rational, and not emotional; doing mathematics, having abstract thought, wanting an open humanity, through reason and masonry, and not one closed by religious fanaticism; translating in all languages, interpreting anything, bringing nations closer, creating ‘Internationals’; perceiving the machinist era as a humanistic school, and not as a defeat and sublimation of nature; being done with nature on all levels: economical, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical; saying, *Deus sive humanitas*, and not *Deus sive natura*, as the heretical Jew Spinoza!

“All these have been obtained in 2,000 years. In 1945, after the huge sacrifices suffered under the outburst of the beastly nature against the rational man, my Jews have again conquered primacy in the world, giving to the secular Universal its purest version: the fellowship of humans as rational beings. There is the version of Marxist International, given by the Jewish spirit as well; it could have taken it in its hand, enlightening it. But there is also the less annoying version for the rest of the world of a supra-historical rational community. I am not saying that the president of UN should have been a Jew every year; but its permanent secretary should have been a Jew. It cannot be otherwise, if the Jew is the ‘binder’ of the world and if he is the only one able to interpret this new Testament.

“And what did my nation do?,” engineer Goldstein concludes. “It made a nation state, it revived a local religion and a local language; it wants to reinvent a local nature; even more, after it had obtained a type of human liberated from animality, with a brain closest to the electronic brain, now wants to reintegrate Judaic humanity in animality, vigor, force, and combative spirit.

“I do not know whether, in this way, the Jewish are maybe planning a third Universal for humanity, in 2,000 other years. But I return to the first Universal it has given to the world, and I ask to become Christian so that I could pray for the soul of my people…”